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4-H Club Discussion Paper

October, 1936

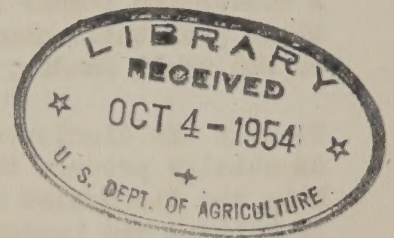
DO WE WANT TO BE FARMERS ?

This publication, prepared especially for the use of 4-H club leaders and members, is intended to assist in discussion of the future of farming, especially as this future may be affected by the agricultural conservation program.

An Outline and Selected Information  
for Use in 4-H Club Programs

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Arranged in Five Parts for Five Meetings



- (1) Advantages of Farm Life
- (2) Tendency to Low Net Farm Income
- (3) What Can Be Done to Increase Income ?
- (4) The Threat of Soil Exhaustion
- (5) Should the Government Aid the Farmer  
Save the Soil ?

SUGGESTED REFERENCE READING

1. Farming as a Life Work, Dr. O. E. Baker, Extension Service  
Circular 178, U. S. Dept. of Agriculture, Washington, D. C.
2. Opportunities Ahead for Rural Youth, G-46, A. A. A., Washington, D. C.
3. New Frontiers, Henry A. Wallace, published by Reynal & Hitchcock.
4. America Must Choose, Henry A. Wallace, World Affairs Pamphlet  
No. 3, Foreign Policy Association, New York City
5. Industry's Production Policies and the Farmer, G-44, A. A. A.,  
Washington, D. C.
6. Saving the Soil, Agricultural Adjustment Administration, Washington,  
D. C.
7. Deserts on the March, Paul B. Sears, University of Oklahoma Press,  
Norman, Okla.
8. Is Soil Conservation the Answer to the Farm Problem ?, Community  
Discussion Paper (CDP 1.) Agricultural Adjustment Administration  
Washington, D. C.
9. Soil Conservation - Its Place in National Agricultural Policy

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Washington, D. C.



This discussion paper has been prepared for use in five 4-H club meetings. It should provide five programs of perhaps 45 minutes each.

Using the general discussion theme: "Do We Want to Be Farmers?" (and we might add "farmers' wives"?) advantages and disadvantages of farming as a career are covered, and why and how farmers are cooperating with the Government to remove some of the disadvantages.

A suggested discussion leader's outline has been placed at the beginning of each of the five parts. It is intended to be a helpful guide to draw out discussion, but the leader need not follow it slavishly.

In preparation for the program in each of the five meetings, every member should read and study the paper in advance.

A discussion leader should be selected to ask questions and direct the talk along profitable channels. This discussion leader may be an older member, or the adult leader, or some adult in the community.

To help the discussion leader, a team of two or three may be chosen to especially prepare themselves in advance. These team members can greatly help the discussion by contributing information when the meeting lags, and by helping the leader keep the talk on the subject at hand.

The leader's job is to open the meeting and ask leading questions which will develop the theme. He should discourage any one member from talking too long or too often. On the other hand, he should not suppress free expression of opinion, even though that opinion be not to his liking. At the end, the leader should summarize what has been said, or call upon some member to do so.

Each program should be so interesting that the members will want to read more on the subject. The reference reading cited on the front cover is a guide, but it is far from complete. It will pay each club to secure copies of the publications listed, and others, and to have them available for loan.

The programs should lead to study of the Government Conservation programs as they are working out in the community, and to result in active 4-H Club help in making them succeed.

Suggestions of what 4-H Club members may do to aid conservation programs are:

- (1) Make a survey of local fertility and soil erosion problems in the community.
- (2) Help Dad make a conservation program for the farm.
- (3) Take one to five acres for a soil conservation demonstration.
- (4) Put on one or more agricultural conservation public programs, inviting the entire community to attend. Parts Two, Three, Four and Five might be used as the basis, either combining them or treating them separately.

Note to County Agents: These discussions can be introduced in the county by calling together all adult local leaders, or older club leaders, for the purpose of training them for the community discussions by putting on a demonstration discussion. Definite plans for the follow-up community club discussion may be made at this time.



PART ONE: ADVANTAGES OF FARM LIFESuggested Outline for Discussion Leader

1. How many want to live on a farm? Why?
2. How many don't want to live on a farm? Why?
3. Do you think you could have better food if you live in the city?
4. Do you think you would live in a better house in the city?
5. Will you likely wear poorer clothes if you live on a farm?
6. Is farm life healthier than city life?
7. Where are your chances for long life better -- city or country?
8. Will you have a better chance to make money in the city?
9. Where will you be more apt to accumulate wealth -- city or country?
10. Do you think you will like office or factory work better than farm or farm home work?
11. Does love of work make up for some other disadvantages?
12. Where will your home life be more enjoyable, in the city or on the farm?
13. Where do you find larger families -- country or city? Why?
14. Can the cities grow without immigration from the farms?
15. Is declining population good or bad for America?
16. Again, how many want to live on the farm? How many in the city?
17. Summary of the advantages and disadvantages of farm life by leader or some chosen member.

DO WE WANT TO BE FARMERS?Part One: Advantages of Farm LifeI. INTRODUCTION:

Most youngsters love the farm. As they gain in years, however, there often comes a change. They hear and see things formerly not noticed: the money worries of Dad, the cares and disappointments of Mother, the meagre return for a year's hard labor, the occasional destruction of crops by drouth and insects, and most disturbing -- the apparent pleasures of life in town. The broad highway leads to places where it is plain there is money a-plenty, and stores, and shows, and company. The concrete road becomes the symbol of escape from a hard life of limited pleasure to a life believed to be freer and of larger returns.

What Shall We Do?

Most young men and women come face to face with the necessity of deciding what they want to do with their lives, where they want to live, and what they want to do. In years gone by many of them have decided farm life too lacking in comfort and opportunity, and have heeded the call of the city. For generations the farm has furnished America the fresh virile blood that has built the cities.

The depression arrested this city-ward movement. Repelled by unemployment and city distress, 2 million farm boys and girls who would have moved to the cities in normal times, stayed on the farm during the 1930-35 period. Backed up on the land, this youthful army accounts in large part for



the increase of 1/2 million new farms since 1930. Unfortunately, many of these new farms were carved from old worn-out land, ill suited to farming.

Yet farming under such handicaps may have been better than attempting life in the distressed cities. Even in normal times, not all who have fared forth from the farm found satisfaction in the towns. For every success there have been many failures. In recent years, especially, country boys and girls looked out upon a city world of unemployment and uncertain living. They have seen former farm boys and girls returned during the depression tired and broken to the shelter of the old home place. A disquieting suspicion has spread that perhaps the world does not need them.

So it is that the decision to quit the farm forever is not so easy to make now as a generation ago. In these days of widespread unemployment the advantages of farming as a career should not be weighed too lightly. On the other hand, the disadvantages must be faced. Should the decision be to remain in the open country it should be accompanied by a determination to work with others to overcome those disadvantages.

#### Away with Inferiority Complexes

Let us acknowledge at the outset that farmers as a class have been more or less submerged in the rising tide of a city civilization these last 100 years. Farmers have developed a full-size inferiority complex. They have come to regard themselves as city people too often regard them: poor business men, unfortunate left-overs on the land, poorly educated, rather behind the times in styles and tastes, a bit laughable, and a little stupid. Because farmers have been somewhat blinded by the surface glories of the city, they have come to think these things may be so.

The point of this discussion is that no satisfying farm life can be developed, no true country civilization evolved, as long as farm people are ashamed of their own. True civilization is the adaptation of a people to its physical, mental, social and artistic environment. Civilizations are built by virile people who are proud of their own, and who are determined to express themselves in ways fitting to their own needs.

#### Let Us Be Proud of Ourselves

If farming is to come into its own as a satisfying way of life the oncoming generation must quit this silly inferiority complex. Those who would make farming a profession should come to it with heads up, full of pride of occupation, and with that love of the land that makes life close to it good, and for them, the best.

It is in this proud spirit that these suggestions on the pros and cons of farm life are offered for discussion. In all American history there was never a time so ripe for intelligent discussion, for we are undoubtedly at a great turning point. What young men and women now living on farms think and do about farm life may profoundly affect the lives of future generations of farmers.

The theme of this discussion is that farm life offers some real attractions such as good food, long life, chance to acquire property, and a



satisfying family life; but that offsetting these advantages is the likelihood of low farm prices and low buying power for a long time, and the danger of loss of the best of the soil through erosion and depletion of fertility. What has been proposed to overcome these disadvantages, what is now being done through Government programs, and how 4-H club members can help, is sketched for discussion.

## II. SOME OF THE ADVANTAGES OF FARMING\*

### The Farmer has Better Food

From farm and city surveys made some years ago, it was found the farm families were consuming about 50 percent more protein, 50 percent more calcium, 40 percent more phosphorus, and 30 percent more iron than the standard ration necessary for good nutrition, while the workingmen's families had barely enough protein and had a deficiency of 16 percent in calcium, 10 percent in phosphorus, and 15 percent in iron. The farm families ate 40 to 100 percent more meat, eggs, milk, fruits, and vegetables than did the workingmen's families, which depended more on cereals. It is clear, therefore, that the farm families were well provided with vitamins, whereas the diet of workingmen's families was deficient in this regard. Of course, the people with larger incomes in the cities can eat more adequate food.

### Clothing and Homes Not So Good

It is with reference to clothing and equipment of the house that farm families live more poorly than do city families. In the surveys just referred to, made by the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Labor, it was found that in families having an income of less than \$1,200 the farm family spent \$117 for clothing and the industrial family spent \$150, whereas in families with incomes of \$1,800 to \$2,400, farm families spent \$307 and the industrial families spent \$381. With regard to the house, the farm houses had more rooms than the city houses, but had fewer modern conveniences. Only about 6 percent of the farm houses were completely modern. This is one of the great lacks of farm life--home conveniences and comforts.

### The Farmer Lives Longer

Despite the poor sanitary facilities in the average farm home, it is probable that there is less sickness among the farming population than among the city population, and there is statistical evidence that the duration of life is considerably longer. In 1920 the Bureau of the Census published what are known as expectation of life tables, and although tables for 1930 have not yet been compiled, the differences in this respect between farm and city have probably changed very little in the decade. In 15 large cities the new-born child in 1920, if a boy, could be expected to live, on the average, to the age of 52, whereas if he were born on a farm he would live to be 56 to 60, the age varying with the State in which he lives. For girl babies the expectation of life was 55 in the cities and 60 to 62 on the farms.

Young people like yourselves, say 17 years old, who have survived the dangers of infancy and childhood, can expect to live, if boys, in the large cities 45 years longer, but in the country about 50 years longer; if girls,

\*From "Farming as a Life Work" --- Extension Circular 178, by Dr. O. E. Baker, Senior Agricultural Economist, Bureau of Agricultural Economics, U.S. D. A.



47 years longer in the cities and 50 years longer in the country. In other words, the new-born child is likely to live 6 or 7 years longer on the farm than in a large city, and even young people at the age of 17 years are likely to live 3 to 5 years longer in the country than in the city.

### The Farmer Accumulates More Wealth

The distribution of wealth is much more unequal in the cities than on the farm. Apparently 80 percent, possibly 90 percent, of the people own less than 10 percent of the property in the cities. On the other hand, if mortgaged farms are a fair sample of all farms, and they probably are, 80 percent of the farmers own 45 percent of the farm property according to the 1925 census. It would seem safe to say that the distribution of wealth is manifold more equable in the farm population than in the city population.

Briefly, the situation may be summarized by saying that there is the possibility of a young man or woman who moves from the farm to the city becoming many times richer, but there is a strong probability that he or she will die poorer in the city than on the farm. Wealth in the city is in no small measure the result of chance, a gamble by millions of people for big stakes in which a few thousand win. Wealth in the country, on the other hand, is normally the result of hard work, managerial ability, and thrift.

### The Farmer May Enjoy His Work

For the farmer who realizes the significance of his work, I believe there is no occupation that affords more substantial enjoyment. Ruskin, the great English author and art critic, wrote many years ago that "There is no wealth but life". The farmer deals with life -- plant life, animal life, and human life. Crops are planted and harvested year after year. Individual plants die and disappear, but the production of wheat and corn and cotton goes on without end. The farmer raises horses and cattle and chickens. Individual animals are slaughtered or die, but the species persists.

Agriculture is based on this fact of reproduction, and the continuity of life. The farmer is constantly dealing with this eternal life. It is a life subject to modification, however, as witness the dairy cow, whose production of milk has been increased twofold, possibly threefold, within a century. The farmer is the heir of all the ages, with an opportunity, through animal breeding particularly, to benefit all the ages to come.

### The Farmer Has A Fuller Home Life

It is this knowledge of and respect for life, that is one reason I believe, why farm people emphasize home life.... Now, home life is the great need of the Nation today, and I want my boy to live among people who realize the importance of home life.

The cities are leading the Nation down the same path of depopulation and decline that the Roman Empire followed nearly two milleniums ago. In 1920 there were just about enough children in the cities of over 100,000 population to keep their population stationary. The cities grew because of immigration from Europe and migration from the farms. In 1930 the census showed from 20 to 25 percent deficit in these large cities in number of children necessary to



keep the population stationary. In the small cities there was 10 percent deficit.

On the other hand, in the village population there was a 30 percent surplus in children and in the farm population a 50 percent surplus above the number required to maintain a stationary population.

With immigration from Europe now greatly reduced, it is clear that the cities are dependent on farm and village population not only for a permanent increase of population but to prevent a decline a decade or two hence. If the birth rate declines much further and no increase in immigration is permitted, the natural increase of the rural population will not be enough to prevent a decline in the urban population, nor in the total population of the Nation. Young people who move to the cities must realize the grave danger that their families will die out.

## PART TWO: TENDENCY TO LOW NET FARM INCOME

### Suggested Outline for Discussion Leader

1. Is there much complaint at home about low farm prices?
2. Do you think farm prices are as high as they should be, considering prices for other things?
3. Do your folks consider that farm prices are nearly always too low?
4. Why do we so often have surpluses of farm products?
5. Why didn't we have surpluses very often before the World War?
6. How did the War expand our American cultivated farm lands?
7. How much have tractors and automobiles destroyed the market for some of our farm feeds?
8. Is increase in population keeping up with increased farm production? Why?
9. How did the War cut off much of our foreign farm market? Can we well do without it?
10. What bolstered the foreign market up during the 1920's? Did tariffs hurt?
11. As surpluses piled up, what became of farm buying power?
12. What did industry do to keep up high prices for manufactured products? Did this help the farmer?
13. With industry restricting production and the farmer producing freely, what do you think of the prospect for satisfactory farm prices in the future?
14. Summary by discussion leader, or some chosen member.

## Part Two: Tendency to Low Net Farm Income

### 1. TENDENCY TO LOW NET INCOME

Viewing some of the disadvantages of farming, the one that looms up as the most serious is the tendency of farm buying power to be low. How does this happen? It comes largely from the fact that the farmer produces freely on an over-expanded farm acreage and sells his products in a free competition market. Production tends to be larger than demand, and prices tend to be low.



On the other hand, the farmer buys goods in a market in which most prices are kept rather high by the policy of controlled production in industry.

To understand this better, let's review a little history.

### Agriculture's Distress Affects Industry

Over a span of 100 years farmers swarmed westward over America. Industry took manufacture from the homes and centered it in factories. Steamships and railroads brought world markets closer. The settlement of the American West gave access to the cheapest food in the world. American industry grew with European, and farming kept pace with industry. American cities multiplied and grew in size; free immigration swelled the population; and the farmer found no lack of mouths to feed. Agriculture had its growing pains, but was strong and healthy.

### Agriculture Becomes Ill

After its burst of prosperity caused by the World War, agriculture fell ill. The boom of war days had caused farmers to plow up 40 million acres of grass land. Land values had gone up, and mortgage debts had more than doubled from 1910 to 1920.

After the war automobiles and tractors replaced horses. Thirty-five million acres of land that had produced food for work stock were no longer needed but still were planted.

The situation for the farmer was made still worse by a decided slowing up of population growth. In 1922, not only was the restricted immigration law passed, but the birth rate, which had been falling slowly for a century, declined even more sharply. Instead of having 1-1/4 million new customers every year, as was true ever since the Civil War, the farmer since 1922 has had only 1/2 million persons to increase his market each year.

When both foreign and domestic markets were restricted, industry knew how to adjust itself. The resulting curtailment stopped machines, closed factories, slashed pay rolls, and forced millions of men into the streets. Without wages these unemployed could not buy as before, either from agriculture or industry, but by means of restricted production, industry managed to hold its prices on a fairly firm basis.

### The Hardest Blow: Foreign Markets Restricted

American farmers always had shipped large quantities of products to Europe because they could produce more cheaply and because America owed Europe debts which were paid in part by shipping cheap farm stuff abroad. When the War was over the American farmer did not have cheap foodstuffs to ship any more. Besides, America no longer owed Europe money. Instead, Europe owed America a great deal of money.

The farmer's world market was in serious danger, especially since Europe, with the recent war in mind, began trying to live at home. Some of the foreign foodstuffs Europe needed could be bought cheaper from Australia, Canada, and Argentina -- expanding farm countries with low cost of production.



On top of all this, America increased its tariffs, which meant that it became harder for Europe to sell this country manufactured goods and as much harder for us to sell her farm stuffs.

In 1920 the American farmer faced the loss of his export markets, which had formerly absorbed about 17 percent of his total production. One fact saved him temporarily. Individual Americans increased their foreign investments 7-3/4 billion dollars from 1921 to 1928. Farm exports did not break until these loans stopped. American tariffs were boosted again; but meanwhile Europe and the world had expanded farm production until American farm stuffs were no longer in such demand.

#### Prices Low -- Debts High

Farm prices broke sharply in 1930 and kept on falling through 1932. The farmer's debts were at a high level. His taxes had steadily mounted until they were more than twice as high as before the war -- yet his dollar would buy only half as much. One farmer out of ten lost his farm from 1930 to 1933.

#### Decrease in Price and Increase in Production

Now when farm prices get lower than other prices and the buying power of farm products goes down, farmers struggle to keep on buying the same amount of goods to which they are accustomed. Therefore, they try to produce more in order to keep up their purchases.

In 1932 when it took roughly, 2 bales of cotton, 2 bushels of wheat and two hogs to buy what was formerly bought with 1 bale of cotton, 1 bushel of wheat, or 1 hog, farmers naturally tried to raise more cotton, more wheat, more hogs. With shrunken foreign markets this added to an already growing surplus, depressed prices, and still further lowered the buying power of cotton, wheat and hogs. The more the farmer struggled to keep up standards of living in the only way he knew of, by himself, the worse off he became under such conditions as those of 1932.

#### Part Three: WHAT CAN BE DONE TO INCREASE INCOME ?

##### Suggested Outline for Discussion Leader

1. Do you think cutting costs of production will solve the problem ?
2. Will cooperative marketing assure the farmer prosperity ? What are the prospects of restoring farm markets by enlarging foreign trade ?
3. How will the farmer fare if we "live at home" as a nation ? As individual farmers ?
4. Do you think Government price fixing will help the farmer ?
5. What if industry would produce to capacity regardless of price ?
6. Do you think finding new uses for farm products will help ?
7. Suppose we do nothing, let Nature take its course ?
8. Summary by discussion leader, or some chosen member.



### Part Three: WHAT CAN BE DONE TO INCREASE INCOME ?

#### I. SUGGESTED REMEDIES

And so it is that farm buying power tends to be low. As far as we can see this will continue. Is there any way out -- anything that the oncoming generation of farmers can do to keep farm buying power at levels which are high enough to maintain high living standards ?

One way -- that of controlled production -- was declared unconstitutional by the U. S. Supreme court. If that method is used it must be carried out by the States and not the Federal Government.

A number of other ways have been suggested. Among these ways are: (1) increase efficiency, cut cost of production; (2) cooperative marketing; (3) reopen foreign markets; (4) live at home, both on the farm and as a nation; (5) fix prices to guarantee cost of production; (6) induce industry to produce to capacity and let industrial prices fall in accordance with the law of supply and demand, thereby bringing about "parity" between industrial prices and farm prices; (7) find new industrial uses for farm products; (8) return to the "let nature take its course" adjustment of 1932 by doing nothing.

#### Cutting Cost of Production

For 150 years farmers have been working to increase their yields. It is well known that within certain limits larger yields mean lower costs. Better farm methods, encouraged by county agent, vocational agriculture teachers, colleges, farm papers, and others, have enabled some farmers to make larger profits.

Farmers are unanimous in declaring that costs, with the best of present machinery and methods, cannot be reduced down to the point where there is any profit left in 5-cent cotton, 30-cent wheat, and 3-cent hogs -- farm price levels of 1932.

#### Cooperative Marketing with Government Aid

In spite of the belief that farmers will not stick together in cooperative efforts, a great deal of success has been achieved in efforts to organize cooperative selling and buying associations.

No way has yet been worked out without Government aid, for protecting the majority of loyal cooperators from the unbridled acts of the non-cooperating minority. While cooperation cannot maintain prices, it can give to farmers part of the middleman profit.

#### Reopening of Foreign Markets

If the United States is to regain its former foreign markets for farm goods, Americans must buy from abroad. If this country wants to export more farm stuffs it must import more manufactured or other goods from foreigners. Exporting and importing represents a trading of goods back and forth.



The reciprocal trade agreements worked out with many countries including Canada, Cuba, Belgium, France and others in the last two years, represent a determined effort to open up foreign trade on a safe basis.

However, several factors suggest that foreign trade may not soon return to the level of the 1920's. (1) A wave of nationalism, of national living at home, has swept the world. Every nation tries to buy as little from abroad as possible. (2) Two-thirds of the American farm export market is in Europe, and it is Europe that has done the most to raise her own food supply. (3) Farm production has increased in big farm export countries like Argentina, Canada and Australia. This means greater competition in world markets -- greater difficulty in selling our farm stuff abroad. (4) A large part of our foreign sales in the 20's was based on loans to foreigners. Those are not apt to be made any more. (5) Making trade agreements is bound to be a slow process.

### Living at Home as a Nation (Nationalism)

Those who favor the "live at home" policy point out that America has a generous share of the world's resources and only 6 percent of the world's population. They believe we can sell little or nothing abroad, and buy little or nothing from foreigners, and find plenty of market in America for all our products.

True, we could follow such a policy better than any other nation, but the price would be lower living standards for the American people. Farmers might be harder hit by such a course than other classes of people. First, the farmer has come to depend on the foreign market to sell 10 percent or more of his production. If these sales are abandoned it means that Americans must consume the difference or farming must be reduced. Sales of manufactured products may be increased almost indefinitely if people have money to buy; but there is a definite limit to how much people can eat.

### Living at Home on the Farm

In living at home on the farm, farmers might produce practically all of the food for their families, going without what could not be produced on the farm. This would mean lowering their present standards of living. There is one other factor that makes this plan impossible for most farmers. They owe so much money that they must sell some of their products in order to meet debts. If farmers owned their farms and were clear of debt the plan would work, but it would not provide a very high standard of living.

### Price Fixing for Cost of Production

The method of assuring "cost of production" prices by Government price fixing alone is open to serious question. If this method were adopted one of five things would be almost certain to happen sooner or later:

(1) The Government would take over large quantities of farm products and accumulate huge supplies as the Farm Board did, or

(2) The Government would sell its supplies at a loss, making up the difference out of the Federal Treasury, or



(3) The Government would fix prices of farm products at cost of production, but would not take over any quantity of these products, in which event farmers or middlemen would find farm products accumulating on their hands, or

(4) The Government-fixed prices would in practice generally be disregarded, or

(5) Much more drastic control of production and marketing would be undertaken by the Government to support the prices it had named.

#### Induce Industry to Produce to Capacity

It has long been the custom of industry to maintain high price levels by limiting production to what the market will take at what are regarded as "fair" prices. Industry reduced its production by two-thirds in 1932. Industry thus forced 10 million men out into the streets. If industry were to produce to capacity, it would put many of the unemployed back to work and restore their lost buying power. Prices would drop and parity might be brought about, but at a lower level.

#### New Industrial Uses for Farm Products

There is a great deal of talk now about how science, particularly chemistry, is able to find so many new uses for farm products that this alone will solve the farm problem. Everyone agrees that all possible should be done along this line. For years the United States Department of Agriculture and State Experiment Stations and others have been working with some success on this line. New uses have been found, for instance, for cottonseed, soy beans, cane stalks, and wood pulp.

Whether new uses for farm products will absorb the products of some 30 to 50 million surplus acres is a question. It is another question whether such a development would result in maintaining farm prices. Again, some new uses might destroy part of the markets now existing for farm products.

It is a development that should be encouraged, but one which necessarily will be slow.

#### Return to "Let Nature Take Its Course" policy of 1932

If nothing is done, farm prices and industrial prices will be brought into adjustment with each other in the long-run -- the kind of adjustment America had in 1932. The American public can have that kind of adjustment if it wants to pay the price. This course eventually would ruin a large percentage of farmers but in the long run it would be effective.

The American farmer has an opportunity to choose the kind of adjustment he wants to continue. If he does not make the choice himself on the basis of his own thinking, the choice will be made for him by others, and it may not be to his liking.



## Part Four: THE THREAT OF SOIL EXHAUSTION

### Suggested Outline for Discussion Leader

1. Are farms in this community getting poorer or better?
2. What signs of erosion have you seen?
3. Does continuous cropping to the same crops each year injure the land?
4. How much land has been damaged in the United States by erosion?
5. How long has it taken the farmer to lose one inch of top-soil in some regions?
6. How long did it take Nature to form one inch of topsoil?
7. What does erosion cost the United States each year?
8. What accounts for the depletion of our soils? Land hunger? National habit of exploiting all resources? Land speculation? Tenancy?
9. Did low farm prices lead to soil mining?
10. Summary by discussion leader, or some member of club.

## Part Four: THE THREAT OF SOIL EXHAUSTION

### I. THE DESTRUCTION TO DATE

Erosion has destroyed the productive value of 50 million acres of land in America, to date. That, roughly, is 5 times the total cultivated area of England. Another 50 million acres is in almost as bad a condition. Still another 100 million acres yet in cultivation is seriously impoverished, and an additional 100 million is being depleted at an alarming rate.

Nature usually requires from 400 to 1000 years to form one inch of top soil. On much of our land the topsoil -- the farm -- is only 6 or 7 inches deep. Some of our land is losing an inch of topsoil in a year. The annual soil losses by washing and blowing, estimated at 3 billion tons, would cover about 18,000,000 acres an inch deep.

The Soil Conservation Service estimates the fertility loss to America at 400 million dollars per year. It is also predicted that the entire topsoil in some parts of the country will have disappeared entirely within 60 more years unless the destruction is checked. In fertile, level Illinois, boring tests made 10 years or more ago by Arthur J. Mason indicated that 4 inches of rich topsoil, or half the whole, had vanished in a matter of 50 years. The more soil is lost, the faster the remainder goes.

### How Fertility is Lost

Soil fertility may be lost in several ways, most important of which are water and wind erosion, crop removal and leaching.

Continuous cropping of the land without rotation is a serious drain on fertility, yet these losses are small compared to the loss of fertility through erosion. The National Resources Board reports that the yearly loss of fertility through erosion and leaching is seven times the amount used by all crops in plant growth. Humus, too, is important to the soil and closely related to crop yields, and erosion and leaching account for two-fifths of the annual loss of this substance. Crops account for little more than one-fourth the yearly disappearance of humus.



### Erosion Losses

Erosion, it has been pointed out, is the chief soil robber. Not only taking the fertility many times as fast as plants remove it, erosion takes the soil itself. Seldom noticed in the early stages, it moves faster and faster.

Gully erosion is easy to see, but sheet erosion is seldom detected until whole surfaces are scalped. Millions of acres have been abandoned because of the unseen ravages of sheet erosion. It is estimated that 45 percent of the land area of the United States has been damaged by this form of destruction.

A 5-year investigation in Oklahoma shows that the run-off of water from a field continuously cropped in cotton was 11 times as great as from land in Bermuda grass. The soil loss was 670 times greater! Missouri observations over a 14-year period show that even land in a corn-wheat-clover rotation lost 9 times as much soil as land in bluegrass. These are typical examples.

### Causes of Soil Decline

#### Land Hunger:

Perhaps the first chapter in soil waste began with our land hunger, our praise-worthy ambition to be independent. This pursuit of the "American dream" of well-being for the common man, coupled with an utter lack of a constructive national land policy has been one of the major factors. When we gave our public lands to private citizens we attached no strings except the obligation to pay taxes. Too few American land owners have had or today have any great sense of public trust in their ownership of the land.

#### Resources Exploited:

With youthful enthusiasm we swept over the continent with our land settlements. The land seemed boundless, the soil inexhaustible. Farmers in some favored regions today are sure their land will never play out. When land was cheap, if one farm was worn out, another and newer one could easily be found. Without the experiences of older peoples to guide us, we did not know the price Nature exacts for disturbing her balance of forces. We cut down the trees and plowed up the prairies. Thus we started our national career of exploitation.

Land speculation has hastened erosion. Land speculators are not soil conservers, and we have been a nation of land speculators. Too many farmers have looked outward, away from the farm to another farm or to town or city, instead of toward the land -- their own land.

Crop speculation has accompanied land speculation. The two have powerfully stimulated tenancy and absentee ownership. Tenancy does not encourage soil conservation, especially where the lease is short as in this country.



### Low Income Forced Soil Mining:

But the greatest recent cause of the decline of the soil, with its threat to our national future, has been the economic pressure which has forced men to mine the soil to make a living. From the Civil War to the end of the nineteenth century the farmer gave the world the cheapest food it had ever known. Soil wealth which had been ages in the making was the foundation of our foreign farm export trade. We sold or gave away soil fertility with our cotton, wheat, tobacco and pork. No wonder we were successful in competition with the farmers of the world!

While farmers supplied America and the world with cheap food and fiber, protective tariffs and other industrial devices kept manufactured prices high. The buying power of farm products was unusually low. That forced production of greater and greater volume to maintain living standards.

The pressure increased greatly after the war. We failed to recognize that our swift change from debtor to creditor nation called for lower tariffs to maintain foreign trade. Our farm export market was destroyed overnight, but we did not wake up to the fact until 10 years later because we bolstered up that market by making disastrous foreign loans. In the meantime we had expanded our farm lands during the war; had lost a home market for the product of 30 million acres by shifting from horses and mules to automobiles and tractors; and had further restricted the home market by shutting off most immigration. The birth rate, too, was sharply declining.

Farm prices after 1920 were chronically below parity with other prices. To make matters worse, war prosperity boomed land prices and created a too heavy debt load on farmers. When foreign loans stopped, foreign farm exports declined, surpluses accumulated. The combined pressure brought a complete break in 1932.

The first long chapter in American agriculture, a chapter of exploitation, came to an end.

### Part Five: SHOULD THE GOVERNMENT AID THE FARMER TO SAVE THE SOIL ?

1. Why should everybody in America be interested in saving and restoring our soils ?
2. What price will farm people have to pay for neglecting the soil ? City people ?
3. Can the farmer save the soil without Government aid ? Why ? or why not ?
4. If it is to the farmer's best long-time interests to save the soils, why does he not do so ?
5. Is it the farmers' fault that he is often too hard up to save and build the soil ?
6. Were the old Triple A programs conservation programs ? Why, or why not ?
7. What are some of the chief things that need to be done to save the soil ?
8. What Government agencies are helping farmers conserve the land ?
9. What is the Soil Conservation Service doing ? Can you report on anything you have seen ?
10. What is the Agricultural Conservation Program ? What does it aim to do ?



11. How is the program working out in this community? Do farmers believe in it? Why, or why not?
12. Who administers the Agricultural Conservation Program?
13. Do you think farmers ought to cooperate with these programs?
14. Can you suggest any better way of saving the Nation's soils?
15. Summary by discussion leader or by some chosen member.

Part Five: SHOULD THE GOVERNMENT AID THE FARMER  
TO SAVE THE SOIL?

I. SAVING THE SOIL TO THE NATION'S INTEREST

Plainly the Nation must conserve its soil resources if it is to survive. Unless the losses are stopped, in another 60 years it is estimated half or more of our upland farms will be gone. With it will go much of the farm market for city goods, and many of the investments made in land by people who hold life insurance policies. With continued soil losses will come higher priced food and fiber. All aside from the tragic effect on the farm population, the Nation cannot afford NOT to save the soil.

The Price of Neglect

The human costs of soil depletion mount high. Farms stripped of their soil wealth mean bankrupt farmers. They mean poorer food, poorer housing, tattered clothing, children undernourished and lacking normal opportunities. Many of the one million farm families who have had to be cared for by the Federal Government during the past two years, had been trying to make a living on land which could no longer support them.

Nor do these costs stop at the doorsteps of the bankrupt farmers. What little produce such farmers can bring to market is enough to pull down prices which farmers on good lands receive. That in turn forces farmers on good lands to overwork their soil in order to make ends meet.

Here, then is the problem. We have 125 million and more consumers to feed and clothe. We are doing the job now by using up or letting waste away the source of materials original for these needs. Next generation's consumers -- possibly 15 million more than we are -- must look to this soil for their food and clothing. What can we do to farm our soil and keep it, too, and so increase our own chances for a good living and those of tomorrow's consumers?

Private vs. Public Interest

Clearly a national problem, should the Government aid the farmer solve it? Not if the farmer can handle it unaided, but can he? The individual farmer often finds that his own best interests seem to demand tilling the soil to its very limit. Debts and interest and taxes have to be met. Ordinary living and farm upkeep expenses must be met. However much he may want to engage in the efficient type of farming that means conservation, the farmer finds himself compelled by circumstance to exploit his land in order to make a living.

The problem is complicated by the fact that nearly half our farms are operated by tenants. In the areas of greatest erosion more than half



the land is tilled by renters. Their leases are short and they move frequently. Their best interest seems to lie in extorting from the land, this year, everything it can be made to yield. The great proportionate decline per acre in land values from 1930 to 1935 occurred on tenant-operated farms.

The farmer's short-time interests are, after all, the most compelling. Prices below parity drive him to grow all the cash crops possible. Society may become alarmed for its future food and fiber supplies and may urge conservation. Oppressed by low prices for what he sells, higher prices for what he buys, the farmer finds it difficult to respond even when he knows full well the consequences to his farm, to his children, and to the Nation if he does not.

Farm prices are set by the law of supply and demand, freely working. Prices of manufactured goods are determined by the same law, but here the supply is regulated to give the desired price. High protective tariffs on industrial goods have bolstered industrial prices higher still. Under such disparity the farmer is always too close to poverty to conserve and build the soil as the best interests of the Nation require. Poverty makes no investments, however good.

## II. WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE?

More than 3 million farmers united in 1933, under the provisions of the Agricultural Adjustment Act, to stop wasteful production of goods for foreign markets that had vanished and thus lifted farm prices to a parity with those of manufactured goods. This effort gave them opportunity to increase their acreage of conserving crops -- grass, and legumes and pasture. The adjustment programs constituted a step toward conservation.

However the job may be done, or whoever pays for it, authorities are in general agreement that real soil conservation demands a shift to more grasses, legumes, and pasture, restoration of trees on many tracts, and wiser tillage, cropping and grazing practices.

Terracing and contouring will often be needed, particularly where soil losses are further advanced. It seems clear, however, that vegetation will be used more and more to control erosion. Strip cropping may become the rule over large areas.

The badly damaged land should be removed entirely from production, for its own sake and that of the people living on it, as well as for protection of the surrounding lands.

It is possible that land having more than 7 or 8 percent slope will be taken out of cultivation and sowed to grass.

The day will come, if we succeed in the conservation effort, when all row crops will follow contour lines.

All of this will necessarily reduce our acreage of surplus crops, which are notoriously eroding crops. More temperate farming must become the rule if we would save the soil.



### III. PRESENT CONSERVATION PROGRAMS

A number of agencies are attempting to correct the mistakes in land use that have occurred in the past. Among these are the Soil Conservation Service, and Forest Service of the Department of Agriculture, the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, and the Resettlement Administration. Land problems are being studied by the National Resources Board by the various State planning boards.

#### Soil Conservation Service:

Due in large measure to the pioneering efforts of H. H. Bennett and others of the Soil Survey, the Soil Conservation Service was established in 1935 to: (1) Conduct "investigations into the character and extent of soil and water losses in order to develop measures of soil and water conservation adequate to provide for flood control and conservation of national land resources", (2) engage in "conservation operations, involving the carrying out of proper land use and soil and water conservation practices on project demonstration areas, and the application of such practices on extensive areas of publicly owned lands and in other designated work areas", and (3) foster the "general application of soil conservation practices through consultation services and educational and informational means."

This agency, therefore, is attacking the problem partly through the medium of research, broad-scale demonstrations and education. Demonstration projects widely distributed throughout the United States involve 6,500,000 acres of privately owned land. The labor in 450 camps is being employed in other demonstrations covering 7,000,000 more acres, most of which is privately owned. In addition to the demonstration projects on private land, erosion control activities are being carried out on three large areas of Federally owned land representing a total of 39,000,000 acres. Meanwhile cooperating agricultural colleges and experiment stations continue research on all phases of soil management, and the extension services continue to take the results to farmers.

#### The Agricultural Conservation Program of AAA

Conservation provisions of the present national agricultural program are linked inseparably with other broad objectives of immediate interest to the farmer. Among the declared purposes of the Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act are: (1) to conserve soil resources, (2) to protect rivers and harbors against the results of soil erosion in aid of maintaining navigability and in aid of flood control, and (3) to reestablish and maintain the pre-war ratio between the per capita purchasing power of farm and non-farm income. In seeking these objectives, it is also declared that due regard shall be given to the maintenance of a continuous and stable supply of commodities adequate to meet consumer demand at prices fair to both producers and consumers. "Aiming at justice for agriculture and self-interest for the Nation, the plan seeks to salvage and conserve the greatest values in human life and resources with which this Nation is endowed," states President Roosevelt.

The national agricultural conservation program provides payments to individual farmers for voluntarily increasing acreage of soil-building and soil-conserving crops and for approved soil-building practices.



Eligibility for Payments:

Three types of crops, classified according to their relation to erosion and soil fertility, are considered in determining eligibility for payments. Cash crops are, in general, the crops that deplete soil fertility and expose the land to serious erosion. Rates of payments have been worked out carefully to make it possible for farmers to plant more of their lands in soil-conserving and soil-building crops this year. For the first time, soil conservation will pay its way not only in the long run as it always has but also on an immediate one year basis.

The goal of the program for 1936 is a 50-million-acre increase over 1930 acreage of soil building and soil conserving crops.

The program is administered in each State by the farmers themselves, in cooperation with the State extension service through county agricultural conservation associations and community, county, and State Agricultural conservation committees.



